

# Violence Unveiled: Understanding Christianity and Politics in Northern Ireland after René Girard's Rereading of Atonement

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## Introduction

In the twentieth century, few places in Western Europe were as overtly 'religious' as the north of Ireland. Not only were church attendance rates higher than elsewhere, but the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' had come to represent whole ethno-political groups and causes, a convenient, if not always accurate, shorthand for antagonism that was picked up and used both by outside interests and by local street fighters on either side.

Although the resort by some to violence was regularly condemned from the pulpit and the graveside, the difficulty remained that no neutral observer could fail to note the continuity between the evident ethno-political hatred and the doctrines, practices, social relationships and attitudes of many church-going Protestants and Catholics in relation to one another. Religion was integral to experiences of imperialism, identity and cultural organization, and by the twentieth century had come to mark both the critical social and political boundary inside the north of Ireland, and to shape the difference between the north of Ireland and less enthusiastic churchgoers in Great Britain. Violent hostility had claimed ecclesiastical, cultural and political sanction and, even in the democratic era, 'civic equality' did not emerge easily.

Northern Ireland remained a place where claims to be 'the one true church' were understood as claims to secular moral primacy and authority. The Catholic Church took on a powerful political role as the advocate for a

avant tout un théologien alors qu'en réalité mon enracinement est dans les textes littéraires et ethnologiques.'

38 R. Williams, 'Foreword', in *Can We Survive Our Origins? Readings in René Girard's Theory of Violence and the Sacred*, ed. P. Antonello and P. Gifford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), xi-xvi.

39 S. Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 11.

40 Stanley Cavell, cited by Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, 17.

whole community "vis-à-vis" government, and the power and ambition of the priesthood was evident to its critics through their formal role in controlling state-funded schools, hospitals and social services. At the same time, reformation documents that declared that claims by the 'Pope of Rome' to be head of the church, in fact, revealed him as 'Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalts himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God' (Westminster Confession of Faith)<sup>1</sup> still had profound, current and concrete political implications for Protestant attitudes and rhetoric towards Catholics. Suspicion and hostility on confessional grounds found consistent succour and explanation in doctrine and practice. Since the seventeenth century, separation in the north of Ireland was more than a matter of 'difference' but was inseparable from mutually exclusive claims to be 'better' and 'worse', articulated in a recurrent experience of 'friend and foe' rooted in deep mimetic rivalries. By the twentieth century, it had fused in a remarkable way with ideas of identity and nationality and was explicitly used as support by militants on both sides for the 'holy' and 'necessary' resort to violence to political ends.<sup>2</sup>

The synthesis of post-reformation Christian boundaries, with politics to mark 'sides' to a wider imperial conflict, illustrates how deeply the churches and official Christianity were integrated into the mimetic patterns of both institutional and everyday life – so deeply, in fact, that nobody could pinpoint the precise boundary where the religious became the political and vice versa. By the twentieth century, the clergy largely regarded the use of religious categories to formally justify violence as anathema; but cultural antipathy, suspicion and mutual ignorance could sometimes appear 'natural' if not obligatory. Discrimination, forced territorial separation and cultural antagonism were normative and the use of violence to enforce this escalated seriously in the early 1970s. Without doubt, however, the appearance of physical force was a question of the escalation of conflict to ever-greater extremes from which the churches, Christianity and Christians could not be separated, rather than the generation of anything unknown or clearly distinctive or separate.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter is an exploration of the implications of René Girard's rereading of the nature of sacrifice in culture against the backdrop of this conjunction of Christianity with ethnic politics and violence. The relevance

of the example of Northern Ireland does not stem from its peculiar violence, still less from its political importance, but from its emergence as a socio-drama of human conflict, where the mimetic pattern of violence became visible in an unexpected and apparently strategically irrelevant corner and time (it is not by chance that the gospel drama emerges from backwater Bethlehem and Nazareth, not fashionable Rome or Athens). Unusually for a situation of ethno-political violence, the consequences of escalating mimeticism were eventually 'contained'. Paradoxically, the very 'undesirability' of Northern Ireland in international affairs along with its position as a small place surrounded by relatively wealthy Western neighbours, both allowed the mimetic nature of violence to become visible *and* has not yet become terminal.

The second potential source of interest in Northern Ireland lies in the association of ethnic and Christian identities in conflict and in peace seeking. Christian theologizing has acted to both reveal and conceal violence in Ireland. Biblical text and doctrinal claims have been used over generations to give substance and meaning to parties in conflict, and few settings make more visible the struggle of the sacrificial and the anti-sacrificial within historical Christianity. Any reading of violence following René Girard inevitably implies a reading of Christianity by its own core texts. But unusually also, the search for a way out from the mimetic captivity of Northern Ireland in recent years has been characterized by the unexpected emergence of 'reconciliation' as a language of social and political change. Given the mimetic origins of the crisis, and the wider global erosion of structural alternatives, the question of how the almost unbearably radical implications of a Girardian reading of the crucifixion relates to the potential for reconciliation is both immediate and unavoidable.

### For us and our salvation

René Girard's anthropological work has two central themes: first, that human violence arises from our propensity for interpersonal and social mimetic desire, which generates unmanageable patterns of rivalry and mutual antagonism; and second, that the threat which this creates for human society is 'resolved'

through the identification of a scapegoat, a victim sacrificed by the rest of the community. Paradoxically, this sacrificial process also brings peace to those who remain – in an apparently miraculous way. From the *mécomnaissance* of the origins of social peace in sacrifice, human culture and religion emerged under the sign of the scapegoat, now recognized as divine for their capacity to bring both chaos and peace to the community.

The origins of the community in this mechanism are retold in myth and in the identification of prohibitions and laws to preserve the peace. Over time, the efficacy of the mechanism to control violence is reinforced through ritual re-enactment of the original sacrifice and acts to delay the tendency to decay.

Girard's most radical claim, however, is that the predicament of the modern world lies in the fact that the roots of culture and religion in the sacrifice of a scapegoat have been revealed. For Girard, this is primarily the consequence of the action of, first, Judaism and, later, Christianity. In this reading, the Judaeo-Christian scriptures take on a meaning not only as sacred text but also as crucial anthropological adventure, recording the journey of exploration and discovery of the sacrificial reality underpinning culture. The revelation of the truth about human culture reaches its climax in the passion of Jesus of Nazareth and the story of crucifixion and resurrection at its core, as the gospel narrative almost uncannily re-enacts the foundational mechanism at the core of culture, only this time illuminating the process from the perspective of the victim:

It is important to insist that Christ's death was not a sacrificial one. To say that Jesus dies, not as a sacrifice, but in order that there may be no more sacrifices, is to recognise in him the Word of God: 'I wish for mercy not sacrifices.' Where that word is not obeyed, Jesus can remain. There is nothing gratuitous about the utterance of that word and where it is not followed by any effect, where violence remains master, Jesus must die. Rather than become the slave of violence, as our own word necessarily does, the Word of God says no to violence.<sup>4</sup>

The exposure of the violence at the heart of culture and of human being tears the veil from the claims of violence to be anything else (transcendence, sacrality, holiness) and places responsibility back on its human authors. Instead of a community based on driving out its own violence by violence,

the victim is revealed as the miraculous image of a God who refuses reprisal, offers forgiveness and opens up a new world (the kingdom) that is marked by contrition, mutual service and forbearance. Jesus' death, far from being an act to appease a jealous or wrathful God, is refigured in the gospel as the wilful but unwitting sacrifice of the God of love, by the jealous and wrathful crowd led by the powers of religion and politics. But instead of driving out God, revealed as a threat to the social and political order, the act of driving out reveals, at least to the small number of those around him both who God is and who we are: a God who refuses all violence and the complicity in and responsibility of the crowd for violence and murder.

For Girard, the narrative history of Jesus in the gospels is the definitive account of the revelation of the surrogate victim mechanism, which manipulates the violence that is generated abundantly from the evolutionary system, both in the free play of pre-human nature and, albeit temporarily stabilized, in the world of human culture and human freedom. Furthermore, Girard reads the Passion story as a decisive disarming-by-disclosure of that *sacralising victimary mechanism* which now, in our own times, through the slow osmosis of Christianity into human culture at large, has become dramatically weaker, is losing control, and being pushed aside – thus ushering in the dramatically sharpened alternative characteristics of our times. *Either* the slouching beast will blow up Nazareth and all of us with it *or else* – impelled by the *hope* that comes with knowing that violence cannot be constrained by sweeping it under the carpet of sacrificial blood and mystic thunder, realizing that it no longer needs to be – we shall turn to loving.<sup>5</sup>

Grasping the fundamental nature of the breach that Jesus accomplishes has been the work of millennia. It is also clear that the claim is profoundly out of sync with the tenor of our own time. But the tendency of 'Christians' to return to a fundamentally sacrificial reading of the gospel, especially as it became central to the political organization of Western society, and later the globe, has been unmistakable. For some, like Ivan Illich, this process has resulted in the *corruptio optimi pessima*, what he calls 'the perversion of the gospel'. The transformation by the church of the opening up to love of the other brought into the world by Jesus in the Good Samaritan parable into juridical and administrative order based on 'criminalisation of sin' have resulted in the



triumph of system over person.<sup>6</sup> As Dostoevsky demonstrates so remarkably in his exploration of the nature of 'the Christian' in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the consequences have been of institutions and human community, which has transported the gospel through time in culture, faithfully eroding both itself and culture in the process, and at times being its most faithless disciple:

Regarding historical Christianity, we must be aware, consequently of its mixed character, the product of an intermingling of static and dynamic religion. ... The Constantinian shift resulted in a Christian universalism that only seemingly resembles dynamic religion and its outreach towards an open society. This type of universalism is a form of imperialism that looks like a form of universalist mysticism but remains bound to static religion and closed societies. Bergson was very well aware that a merely gradual enlargement of a social entity does not lead to an open society. The expansion of closed societies does not change their nature. ... Imperialistic universalism only seemingly leads towards an open society. In reality it remains a closed society, even where it aspires to take in the whole world to be governed by a world state. If Christianity wants to contribute to an open society and a unified globalised solidarity without the need of outside enemies, it has to overcome its own temptation towards collective pride. It has to detach itself from Constantinianism and its inherent temptation.<sup>7</sup>

The pivot of history in Girard is the reversal and revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. Our observations on this apocalypse at this point, however, will be limited to two: First of all, Girard overturns the classical medieval understanding of the crucifixion as substitutionary atonement for sin required as the price to appease the wrath of God, which has been of such central importance both to elements within Catholicism and to fundamentalist evangelicalism as it emerged in the West from the nineteenth century. Writing in response to Girard, the Swiss Jesuit theologian Raymond Schwager noted:

It has been repeatedly said that Christ, as God-man, offered through his death an infinite satisfaction to his heavenly Father; that he vicariously atoned for the limitless offence inflicted on God through the sins of human beings. ... Yet, the image of God that stood behind the long-accepted satisfaction theory can hardly be brought into harmony with the father

to whom Jesus repeatedly referred. The parables of the prodigal son and the merciless creditor make it clear that God forgives without demanding satisfaction and payment in return. He demands only that we forgive others as unconditionally as we are granted unconditional mercy. ... The God of Jesus Christ is exactly the opposite of violence. He does not seek a quid pro quo. He does not demand an eye for an eye. His limitless forgiveness and boundless love are distinct in every respect from the mechanism of violence and the vicious circle of mutual destructiveness. Therefore any thought of retaliation must be completely eliminated from genuine Christian teaching of redemption.<sup>8</sup>

Second, salvation can now be understood both as liberation from the reign of violence and as an invitation to life, a kingdom of love beyond death as instigated by Jesus – through self-sacrifice and endurance if necessary. The fundamental invitation of Jesus in the gospel is to follow him from the old world into the new, eternal world, 'the possibility of post-sacrificial, nonviolent fellowship with the divine, as prefigured in the Hebrew scriptures, and as integrally expressed in the self-sacrificing death of Jesus'.<sup>9</sup> The salvation of each believer and each believing community has its origins in divine grace, depends on forgiveness and forgiving, and is marked by humility and contrition.

### 'A factory of grievances': Religion and rivalry in conflict in Ireland

Girard's concern is ultimately for a clearer understanding of the dynamics of human cultural origins, history and future. Part of this development depends on exploring and tracing the path of violence and religion in historical time. In the case of Ireland, the specific additional dimension involves engaging with the ways in which Christianity has acted to both reveal and conceal violence.

This chapter is neither a history of conflict in Ireland nor a history of Christianity in Ireland, both of which are enormous subjects inevitably full of contradictory and complex evidence. Rather, it is a schematic consideration of the ways in which Girard's theories of the mimetic nature of violence throw light on the origins of conflict in an ethnic frontier like Northern Ireland, and

Christianity has interacted with ethnic identity and the use of violence.

Tracing the mimetic origins of conflict in the north of Ireland inevitably reconnects the particular circumstances of Ireland back into the wider emergence of conflict in Europe and Christendom. 'Sectarianism' – conflict between people separated within a religion, each making rival claims to transcendent power and authority – in Ireland emerged as a specific aspect of movements of political and social rivalry, all of which have a recognizably international and European dimension: the divisions of Christendom, the expansion of political empire and revolutionary attempts to establish democracy. In the sixteenth century, the edifice of 'Christendom' that reached its apex in the crusades was established on its transformation into competing dynastic and, later, national empires. After Columbus returned from his dramatic adventure in 1492, the balance of economic power moved decisively to the West. Ireland, previously largely peripheral to political interest, now lay closer to the Atlantic centre. In terms of mimetic patterns, Ireland unexpectedly found itself an object of desire.

All of this was fuelled by the consequences of the Lutheran controversy and the rapid spread of Protestantism, and the descent into armed and political Christian civil war in Europe. By 1555, the German princes had concluded that only strict political separation could save the Holy Roman Empire from what we might call, after Girard, a crisis of undifferentiation. And so at Augsburg in 1555, they declared the doctrine of stability based on mutual exclusion: *Cuius Regio, Eius Religio*.

The distinct circumstances of Britain and Ireland had different consequences. Unexpectedly catapulted into the place of the largest anti-Roman power in Europe, the English became increasingly concerned to ensure their Western flank in Ireland. Over a period of fifty years, this concern crystallized into a determination to bring Ireland under political control. The risk posed by Ireland was characterized by the potential for the island to act as a Catholic base from which to attack the fragile Protestant settlement. The pattern of mimetic escalation of conflict between the colonial administration and the native Irish took on an increasingly sectarian tenor.

When the significant Irish resistance was defeated, and the Irish leadership departed to seek reinforcements among the courts of Catholic Europe,

the British authorities took the fateful step of confiscating native land and establishing a policy of settling it with Scots and English who could be relied upon for loyalty. In Girardian terms, loyalty depended on settlers who could be relied upon to share the mimetic identity and rivalries of the state: in practice, this meant settling Protestants, or even more importantly, anti-Catholics. Uniquely in the North, the settlement left two sides to an unfinished conflict living side by side, each aware that the other was intent on revenge. Instead of the violent separation required by *cuius regio eius religio*, settlement resembled a frontier of doubles, locked by mimetic rivalry in an endemic crisis of undifferentiation, in which Christian rivalries provided the most ready and reliable means of representation and differentiation. With that come the dangers, not only a danger that 'history' would be subsumed into memory of mimetic conflict, but also one that Christianity would be called in to aid in providing religious support for sacrifice.

Clearly, then, conflict in Ireland has roots in the mimetic power struggles of civil powers in politics, economics and society. The claim is not that historical Christianity is the conflict, but that it must now be understood as a critical, and potentially unstable, element within a wider culture. In Girardian terms, the critical question is the extent to which that action has been to reveal the centrality of sacrifice or in what ways Christianity has actually acted to provide ballast to violent rivalry.

The central role of Christianity in conflict in Ireland can in part be attributed to the weakness of the secular state and the explicitly confessional nature of the settlement. This led both settler and native to rely on residual ecclesiastical structures for order, legitimacy and comfort. In this anxious world, churches were a crucial available possibility of identity and solidarity, through rituals of solace and sacrifice. In line with much of Europe, the identification of denominations with God's elect gave moral meaning to a violent conflict as a struggle between good and evil. In the presence of actual threat and latent chaos, the experience of the community was narrated in churches against a social backdrop that consistently reproduced the division of the world into friend and foe. As it faced an apparently mortal threat, the attraction of a promise of salvation to God's chosen and persecuted, and damnation to the persecutors, had an obvious resonance.



In each case, the consistent tendency was to associate the history of the community with the sufferings of Christ, representing the predicament of their people as that of the victim. The division of the world into believers and heretics had immediate parallels with the social experience of friend and foe. As Christ had suffered, so the community must now endure. The theological centre of the narratives of conflict and violence was always the passion. But whereas Girard underlines the function of the cross in revealing the *complicity* of the disciples, authorities and crowd, theology in Ireland was overwhelmingly deployed to reinforce the *innocence* of the community. In most cases, this can be traced back to variations on the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Where the crucifixion was understood as an act of God in which Jesus took humanity's debt for sin on himself to appease his God's wrath, the cross was primarily a question of an economy of divine justice in the face of a God of wrath. Violence is not so much unveiled as redirected. Sacrifice is not murder but heroism.

Within a world of substitutionary atonement, doctrines of election and forgiveness are transfigured into promises for the few, who are distinguished from their peers by their allegiance and unique access to truth, not by their conversion to non-violence. Through substitutionary atonement, those who believe are restored to right relationship with God. In its Calvinist manifestation, the believers are 'washed clean' by the blood of Christ, and restored to innocence. Ultimately, however, the world awaits the final wrath of God in a cataclysmic last judgement (apocalypse) in which the righteous will be called home.

This identification of God's people with the sojourn of a people, and the identification of those people as elect or chosen or true inevitably risks recasting God as the God of the tribe who protects over and against all others. At its most radical, the biblical narrative functioned as a hermeneutic of the innocent revealing the world as a battle between denominations standing respectively for good and evil, substituting for the saved and the damned. Biblical texts proclaiming Jesus's death and resurrection, for US and OUR salvation took on specific ethnic meaning. In the middle of a mimetic vortex of conflict where each participant was convinced of his or her radical difference from the other, the demands of salvation effectively released the believers

from the imperative to love enemies in the context of a political friend-enemy distinction, not unlike Carl Schmitt centuries later.<sup>10</sup>

What is striking to the outside observer, however, is the mimetic similarity of the narratives of struggle in the north of Ireland, even as late as the twentieth century. As Catholic emancipation progressed, it was increasingly reconfigured into a new form of Irish nationalism. But as it did so, British anti-nationalism (Unionism) was increasingly articulated in ultra-Protestant and anti-Catholic tones. The fact is that both sides confronted each other from a position of increasing equality. Mimetic rivalry succeeded. Threatened, as they believed, with rule by a resentful Catholic horde, Ulster Protestants pledged themselves in 1912

in solemn Covenant, throughout this our time of threatened calamity, to stand by one another in defending, for ourselves and our children, our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy ... in sure confidence that God will defend the right.<sup>11</sup>

Irish republicanism understood itself as transcending barriers of confession in a common Irish project. But for at least one of the key leaders, Padraig Pearse, the task was seen in explicitly sacrificial terms that drew directly on the passion. Having declared that 'blood is a cleansing and sanctifying thing,' he articulated his own dilemma: 'I see my role in part as sacrifice for what my mother's people have suffered, atonement for what my father's people have done.' He went even further in a poem written just before he was executed for his leadership of the abortive 'Easter rising' in Dublin in 1916:

I say to my people that they are holy, that they are august, despite their chains,/That they are greater than those that hold them and stronger and purer,/That they have but need of courage, and to call on the name of their God./God the unforgetting, the dear God that loves the peoples/For whom He died naked, suffering shame.<sup>12</sup>

Both invoke the defence of God's justice in their sacrificial struggle against the evil enemy, and to legitimate specific violence rather than to constrain it. Both represent themselves as consistent with God's justice and faithful to the justice revealed in the sacrificial scapegoat. Violence, in each case, is a violence to end

part of divine justice and part of a drama of substitutionary sacrifice in which many partake.

Of course, this creates a caricature of the history of Christianity in the north of Ireland. Indeed, many may argue, with some justification, that the churches acted as a bulwark against extremism and against the escalation into violence. But any examination of *rhetorical* Christianity's relationship to politics will be struck by the relative isolation of voices of protest against this drift, especially at times of escalation. There is no doubt that the alignment of Christian denomination with national identity in conflict in Northern Ireland was and remains striking. Violence in this relationship was inevitably experienced from within religious communities, and the potential for 'mimetic capture' was considerable. Churches organized to maintain boundaries against one another were condemned to protect and organize on behalf of one 'party to conflict', but seldom to mediate and reveal the relationship. Radical doctrines of both Protestant fundamentalism and radical Catholic liberationism were held by only small minorities within church hierarchies, but their influence and logic were everywhere in politics. Ultimately, it is this backdrop that underlines the significance which the elaboration of the scapegoat mechanism might represent in Northern Ireland.

The tensions of relationships in Northern Ireland escalated to new and unseen levels in the early 1970s. Whole districts were cleared of their minorities, and sectarian murder reappeared. Churches that had begun to think about and even make gestures towards one another found themselves drawn into the crisis, uncertain and unclear and apparently drawn in every direction.

Unusually, and possibly unexpectedly, the extreme escalation was slowed to what one British cabinet minister memorably called 'the acceptable level of violence.' Fragile, bitter and uncertain Northern Ireland did not collapse. While conflict escalated to the extremes in an almost textbook 'Clausewitz' pattern, with no evidence of any appetite for Hegelian *Aufhebung* (see Girard),<sup>13</sup> the crisis did not reach its appointed climax. Instead, it was held in a state of incompleteness by the intervention of much bigger parties, who were by then sufficiently distant from the religious articulation of difference in Northern Ireland to enable them to resist the potential for mimetic contagion.

Violence was not stopped but managed. Conflict was not resolved but channelled and dammed. Killing continued, but at a level that did not consume the system – for twenty-five years. In that sense, we were possibly both the luckiest and the most unfortunate people in any ethnic conflict, anywhere. In Girardian terms, this unusual attenuated escalation allowed us to innovate, to make gestures and ... to survive with at least the possibility of meeting each other again on the other side.

## He died for us: The possibility of reconciliation in Northern Ireland

Identifying the mimetic character of violence in the ethnic frontier is not an especially complex undertaking. In Northern Ireland, the language of tit-for-tat has long had a common currency. One of the consequences of the slowing of the mimetic escalation has been the exposure of violence as a chain of revenge, which extends without limit until it reaches its cathartic climax. That so much effort was put into preventing precisely this climax left Northern Ireland with both aspects of the horror and fascination of violence unresolved. The exposure of the chain of causality even spawned a unique linguistic formula called 'Whataboutery', where every conversation about an incident of violence that pinned blame on one ethnic perpetrator was likely to require a responsive story pinning blame on the other side, and premised by the exculpatory introduction, 'but what about this other case ...'

Identifying the *existence* of reprisal has, however, proved, much easier than identifying a mechanism to escape from it. In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Girard observed:

People imagine that to escape from violence it is sufficient to give up any kind of violent initiative, but since no one in fact thinks of himself as taking this initiative – since all violence has a mimetic character, and derives or can be thought to derive from a first violence that is always perceived as originating with the opponent – this act of renunciation is no more than a sham, and cannot bring about any kind of change at all. Violence is always perceived as being a legitimate reprisal or even self-defence. So what must be given up is

the right to reprisal and even the right to what passes, in a number of cases, for legitimate defence. Since the violence is mimetic, and no one ever feels responsible for triggering it initially, only by an unconditional renunciation can we arrive at the desired result.<sup>14</sup>

For this reason, models of so-called 'peace-building' that prioritize specific design of a new social contract or political order, or the satisfaction of particular issues, are always liable to relapse, unless they also alter the underlying relationship of mimetic rivalry through which the conflict is constituted, and bring either or both parties to that same place of renunciation that is made available to them through the passion of Christ. Far from pious rhetoric, the gospel is revealed as the ultimate realism. On the basis of Northern Irish experience, it is simultaneously urgent, accurate and out of reach.

Problematically, however, Girard's work on the scapegoat mechanism, and his work to trace its operation through the gospels, is, therefore, necessarily a matter of the revelation of our own complicity in these dense networks of mimetic desire and violence. This removes from us the capacity to act with anything other than humility. The possibility of reconciliation can only be established through the gate of revelation of our complicity with violence, and through the inauguration of a community that lives out of shared bread, forgiveness and contrition.

The recognition has proved no easier in the Christian or the non-Christian world. In an unusual way, the language of reconciliation became the narrative of public discourse. Like everyone else, the institutional church seems determined to mitigate the exposure that the gospel indicates as the way towards freedom. Paradoxically, the language of reconciliation seemed easier for secular politicians rather than for confessing church people. But unsurprisingly, without a means to articulate grace, politicians have struggled at times to make sense of a concept whose consequences they seek, but whose origins they only dimly understand and whose Christian origins make them profoundly suspicious.

Since the first flush of apparent breakthrough, it has become clear that recrimination over the past is the single biggest obstacle to a decisive break towards a future together. Even more, the possibility that we might have to change our narrative of purpose drawn from antagonism is an invitation to a

kind of cultural death that is both dimly intuited and violently rejected. But the invitation to reconciliation is and was always an inversion of the narrative of innocence to a narrative of complicity and the possibility of redemption and forgiveness, and it is, in social terms, also an invitation to chaos. Dealing with the past has become the mantra hiding the insight that we cannot deal with the past in conflict without facing who we were for our victims – and they, in turn, cannot move out of their world, without meeting who they were for us.

And in its midst, the hope of a new form of salvation also grew. I have lived some of this experience from an unusual vantage: from inside a Christian community brought into existence five years before the crisis to work for reconciliation as a critical voice from within the church and from an interchurch membership. In that sense, I am as much data as researcher, and what I have to say has to take account of that. In an academic volume, I have to beg your indulgence for my wilful ignoring of the rules.

In the midst of our endlessly attenuated conflict, the community became a kind of refuge for people fleeing violence or the constraints of communities seeking to impose order in the midst of chaos. As such, it became a place of story and experience, of meeting and coping and recuperating and experimenting – and it was mediated within a framework of Christian commitment, albeit from a slightly non-official, if still connected, place. At times, but over decades, this took us into our own narrative of innocence and superiority as we enjoyed too much our own publicity around reconciliation within our own circles. But, above all, meeting forced us time and time again towards recognition and service. In the midst of an ethnic conflict, it offered endless possibilities to be captured by the face of the other, in the sense described by Emmanuel Levinas:

The face, *le visage*, is in Levinas's conception the gateway through which the infinite passes. What allows us to escape totality, to pass beyond and open onto the infinite, is the face. The face for Levinas is a passageway, an opening. It is not an object, or a manifestation, or a form of any kind. If we had to delimit the face Levinas says, we would have to say that the face is nakedness itself, defenceless itself, utter vulnerability. ... It is the speaking of the commandments, or, more precisely, of all the commandments as one commandment in particular, the speaking of the 'Thou shalt not kill.' And



in its wake, we are held captive. We are its hostages, no more free to walk away from it than we are free to have the other individual die in our place.<sup>15</sup>

All of this was mediated within a relatively conventional Christian framework, albeit one with an increasingly sharpened ear for difference and reconciliation. But it was the irruption of the face of the victim into the community that breathed new life into our self-understanding. Through the work of Dutch colleagues, especially Roel Kaptein and Andre Lascaris, we were invited to meet our own interaction with the world, our own complicity with violence and our dependence on forgiveness for new life. Without theological seminars, we were invited to remove ourselves from the company of the good, and to reconfigure ourselves not as innocent, but as complicit and forgiven, and to see in the crucifixion and resurrection narrative of the gospel the way, the truth and the life in an entirely practical sense.

## Conclusion

For him, the word that comes from God, the word that enjoins us to imitate no-one but God, the God who refrains from all forms of reprisal and makes his sun to shine upon the 'just' and the 'unjust' without distinction – this word remains, for him, absolutely valid for him. It is valid even to death, and quite clearly that is what makes him the incarnation of that Word.<sup>16</sup>

The exposure of the scapegoat mechanism, and Girard's reworking of the doctrine of atonement that it forces on us, is not merely a scholarly breakthrough. The experience of Northern Ireland suggests that, in the midst of a chain of revenge, the question of reconciliation becomes unavoidable.

At the same time, the revelation that peace depends on the renunciation of revenge makes for complex politics. It also makes for revolutionary consequences for churches born of the Constantinian conviction that they are guardians of right rather than witnesses to grace. The Irish experience in both church and society, and of both war and peace, suggests that it is not a road that will be taken willingly, even if it is a road that must necessarily be taken.

## Notes

- 1 Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), <http://presbyterian.ca/?wpdmdl=279> (accessed 1 April 2015).
- 2 D. Morrow, 'There is a Crack in Everything', in René Girard and Creative Reconciliation, ed. V. Redekop and T. Ryba (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto and Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2014).
- 3 R. Girard, *Battling to the End* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007).
- 4 R. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 210.
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